DEMARCHY

a democratic alternative to electoral politics

The basic idea

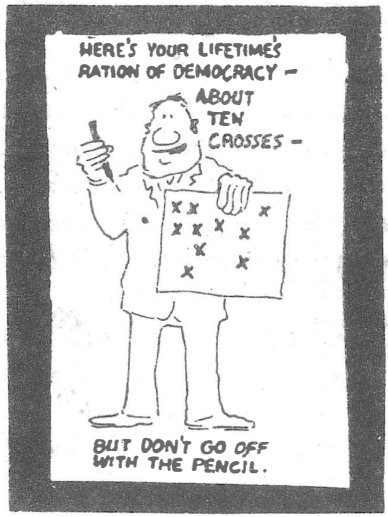
The present standard system of representative democracy is based on electing a small number of officials who then make decisions on a wide range of issues.

Demarchy, by contrast, is based on a network of numerous decision-making groups. Each group deals with a specific function, such as transport, land use or health services in a local area. The membership of each body is chosen randomly from all those who volunteer to be on it.

Random selection is also called the lot system, the jury system or sortition. Demarchy can also be called statistical democracy.

If the community decides that certain categories of people should be represented, such as ethnic minorities, the poor or the disabled, then it is easy to arrange random selection of the required fraction of group members from these categories.

The term of office of each group member is strictly limited. Selection of new members is staggered so that skills and experiences can be passed on to the newcomers.



The 'demarchic bodies' mainly exert power through their authority as representatives of the community. The existence of these bodies gives full opportunity to the usual processes of political debate. Every member of the community is able to lobby, write letters and articles, circulate leaflets, hold public meetings and promote nonviolent direct action such as boycotts and sit-ins. Demarchy actually encourages political activity by every section of the community.

In a system of demarchy, there would be a need to handle some issues about the way demarchy itself should operate, such as adjudicating claims that demarchic procedures themselves be changed. These issues can be dealt with by 'second-order' groups, which could be chosen by lot from people on the ordinary groups.

Electoral democracy is built on politicians and vast numbers of government bureaucrats. Demarchy is an alternative to elections and to government bureaucracies. The numerous demarchic bodies each make decisions on specific areas and directly implement the decisions.

The advantages of demarchy

Demarchy involves a much larger fraction of the population in making policy-type decisions. Rather than policy-making being restricted to a small number of politicians and bureaucrats, just about anyone who wanted to would be able to take a turn. This has many advantages.

Professional politicians and career bureaucrats are vulnerable to powerful pressure groups. The links include electoral support, job opportunities and sometimes direct payments.

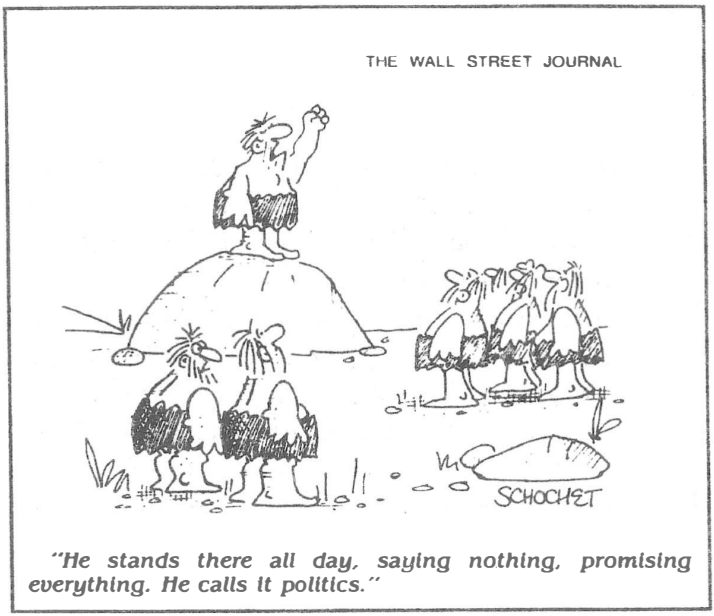
Demarchic bodies would be much less responsive to vested interests. Any given individual would have a limited term of office, and would have less to gain from serving a special interest. Political machines would not be able to groom loyal candidates for office because, with random selection, no one knows who will be chosen. Since those selected will expect to live in the community after their relatively short term of office, there is a strong incentive to represent the community interest in an honest fashion.

Electoral systems encourage those who are ambitious and self-centred to seek office. Only a certain type of personality thrives on the rigours of election campaigning, with its requirements to avoid treading on the toes of the powerful. Furthermore, the power of political office goes to the head of many long-term politicians. Demarchy, on the other hand, gives an equal chance to every type of

personality. All that is required is a willingness to participate.

Demarchic bodies are more likely to be responsive to community desires because they deal with specific areas or functions. For example, a body dealing with education or garbage collection would be very different from an elected local government body. Elected officials are not tied to specific policies; they are elected on an overall platform. It is easy for them to claim mandates which have no basis, and also easy for them to go back on election promises.

"Democracy consists of choosing your dictators, after they've told you what you think it is you want to hear." - Alan Coren



"He stands there all day, saying nothing, promising everything. He calls it politics."

Requirements for demarchy

Because demarchy depends on active participation by a large fraction of the population in important decision-making, it demands a high level of knowledge and experience in the community. This is surely possible in industrialised societies, where there are numerous sources of information and where extended formal education is the norm.

Conversely, the introduction of demarchy provides a powerful stimulus for

learning. Most people, given the opportunity to be involved in making decisions affecting the community, show an enormous capacity and willingness to learn about the issues. Any group in the community that wanted to promote a favoured policy, whether on abortion, industrial development or health, could proceed by winning over and educating as many people as possible and getting them to stand for random selection to appropriate demarchic bodies. Controversial issues thus would encourage a massive increase in educative activity. Demarchy seems a natural extension and incentive for further evolution of a knowledge-intensive society.

"For a ruling bureaucracy, the possession of power is the highest goal, and to keep and strengthen its power is the paramount aim of its policy." -- Erich Strauss

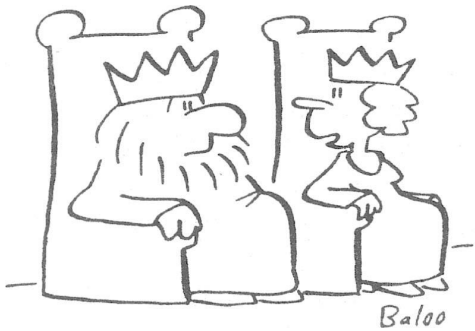
What's wrong with the present system?

In short, corruption, broken promises, popular apathy, and service to vested interests.

Representative democracy based on elections was a great advance over earlier systems based on hereditary rulers. It is also superior to present-day alternatives of bureaucratic state socialism or military dictatorship. There is after all some popular involvement and choice involved with elections.

But just because representative democracy is better than some other systems does not mean it is the best possible system for all time and all circumstances. It is worthwhile to investigate and try out other approaches.

Representative democracy can be responsive to the will of the people when electorates are very small and representatives are mainly dependent on constituent support. But when populations are large and powerful corporations and government bureaucracies are involved, popular control is minimal. Political party machines select



"I know you're an absolute despot, but are you a Democrat or a Republican?"

candidates. Policies are decided mainly by party elites.

All this makes ordinary citizens cynical and apathetic. Voting becomes a choice between remote personalities who are sold like breakfast cereals. When governments break election promises, as they regularly do, disillusionment increases.

One response by those fed up with the established parties is to start a new party. Over the years many new parties have been set up, often with hopes to create a real responsiveness to popular concerns. But invariably the new parties are caught up in the same old system. Either they fail to make much of an impact in the face of the established parties, or else they begin to behave just like them. Today's established parties were yesterday's innovative parties.

"Every revolution evaporates, leaving behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy." - Franz Kafka

The usual response to poor government is to pin hopes on different politicians. But new politicians and new parties must adapt to the existing parliamentary system. Perhaps the solution is instead to try to change the basic way the system works.

Opposition to demarchy

If demarchy is so promising, why hasn't it been implemented more widely? The main reason is that the present system is extremely entrenched.

Almost all politicians will oppose demarchy. So will powerful bureaucrats. This is to be expected, since these powerful people have much to lose.

"Don't ask the barber whether you need a haircut." -- Daniel S. Greenberg

Quite a few voters can feel threatened by demarchy too. They have been taught that voting and elections are the foundation of democracy. Every day in every newspaper the focus is on top politicians. Voting seems to be the only connection people have with them.

Demarchy is indeed threatening and challenging, since it relies on the understandings and values of ordinary people. This is very different from the present system, where the key decisions are made by a tiny minority. Direct and frequent participation in decision-making should be the basis of democracy. The feeling that this is a threat shows how remote from participation the current system has become.

Even leaders of 'alternative' groups may oppose demarchy. After all, they are a privileged elite within their own small constituency. It is those who have the least say in the present system who have the most to gain from demarchy. This may be the strongest argument in its favour.

Demarchy does not fit into the standard boxes of left-wing or right-wing politics. It is a system based on increasing direct involvement of people in political decision-making. It does not guarantee that the directions favoured by current political elites will be followed. Most of all, it differs from standard party-political methods in that there is no privileged elite of politicians and bureaucrats who have excessive power over other people's lives.

"...And if elected I promise government by the people, of the people, for the people, in the people, over, around, through, above, behind, below, after, with and without the people."

Objections

Wouldn't demarchy be less efficient? No one really knows. But first, it should be asked, efficient for what purpose? Dictatorships can be quite efficient for ordering people around and getting things done, but very inefficient in terms of providing justice and freedom.

If democracy turns out to be inefficient in some ways, then most of those who believe in it accept this as one of the costs of living in a democratic society.

But demarchy can be efficient even in narrow terms. The system of trial by jury certainly requires more labour than trial by a single judge. But trial by jury can create more community confidence in the legal system, and provide protection against abuses. Why, after all, do dictators try to get rid of trial by jury?

"Any doctrine that ... weakens personal responsibility for judgement and for action ... helps create attitudes that welcome and support the totalitarian state." -- John Dewey

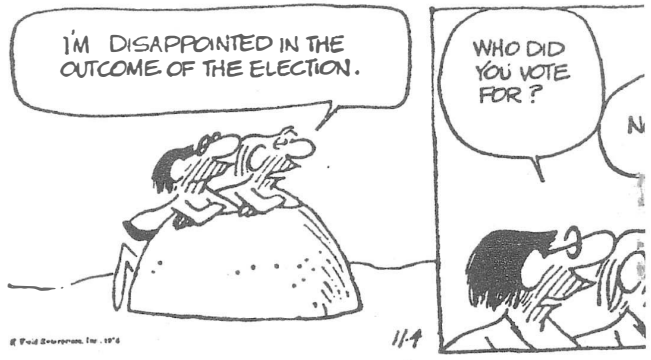
Wouldn't elections produce better qualified decision-makers than demarchy? In one sense, yes. Demarchy allows for volunteers to be randomly selected for a decision-making body, even if they have little education or hold uninformed opinions. Many people who would never be elected to office can be chosen as group members under demarchy.

But the idea of a democracy is not to choose the 'most qualified person'. Otherwise why even have elections? Why not just let candidates put forward their qualifications to a learned selection panel?

Democracy is based on people participating in a direct way in decisions that affect them. A system based on those 'who know best' making decisions for everyone else is either a dictatorship or a paternal welfare system. Furthermore, history has shown that intellectuals are just as susceptible to systems such as fascism and Stalinism as anyone else.

When the experts make the decisions themselves, they do things in a way that puts themselves in a privileged position. In a demarchy, experts would be able to present their views like everyone else in order to persuade decision-making bodies. This way, expertise is at the service of the people, not the other way around.

"No government has ever been, or ever can be, wherein time-servers and blockheads will not be uppermost." - John Dryden



Would people obey decisions made by demarchic bodies? Even in present-day society, most people do most of the things they do because they agree to, not because they are forced to. Most people treat public parks and libraries with respect because they support these services, not because of penalties for violations. On the other hand, it is nearly impossible to enforce a law with little public support, such as laws against certain drugs or cheating on income tax.

Demarchy would not be vastly different from present society in this respect. Most people would abide by sensible decisions made by official bodies. If they opposed them, they would be able to campaign for changes, and even to organise nonviolent resistance. If enough people conscientiously opposed a decision, it would lapse by non-observance.

Isn't demarchy utopian? A full-fledged system of demarchy would be a massive change from present society. Many would see this as unlikely to happen, given that the power of centralised governments, bureaucracies and militaries seems to be ever-increasing.

But this does not mean that demarchy is impossible or impractical. Thinking in the long term, small steps towards demarchy can gradually be made, building on what is already here.

Few lasting and fundamental social changes happen suddenly. It took centuries of struggle to abolish slavery and to bring about electoral democracy. Demarchy will not happen overnight, but that does not mean it is 'utopian' to try to make steps towards it. Indeed, as in the case of all freedoms, continual effort is required.

A range of democratic methods

Besides demarchy and electoral politics, there are also some other methods which deserve consideration for decision-making in a democracy. One is consensus, a powerful method which can work well for small groups, from two to a hundred or even larger. Consensus requires the search for a proposal that can be accepted by everyone, or nearly everyone, with no strong objections. There is increasing experience in how to use consensus methods, developed especially in recent decades in a range of collectives and social movements.

Consensus is the real method at work in many committees and meetings where voting is used when it is obvious that everyone agrees anyway. But consensus methods do have difficulties in many cases, especially with large groups and where fundamental differences divide the group.

Election of delegates (rather than representatives) is another method. Delegates are instructed to express the views of their constituents, and can be recalled at any time. Delegate systems allow for political decision-making in a federation of smaller self-governing units. The problem with delegates is that they can easily solidify into formal representatives, who become less and less accountable to electors.

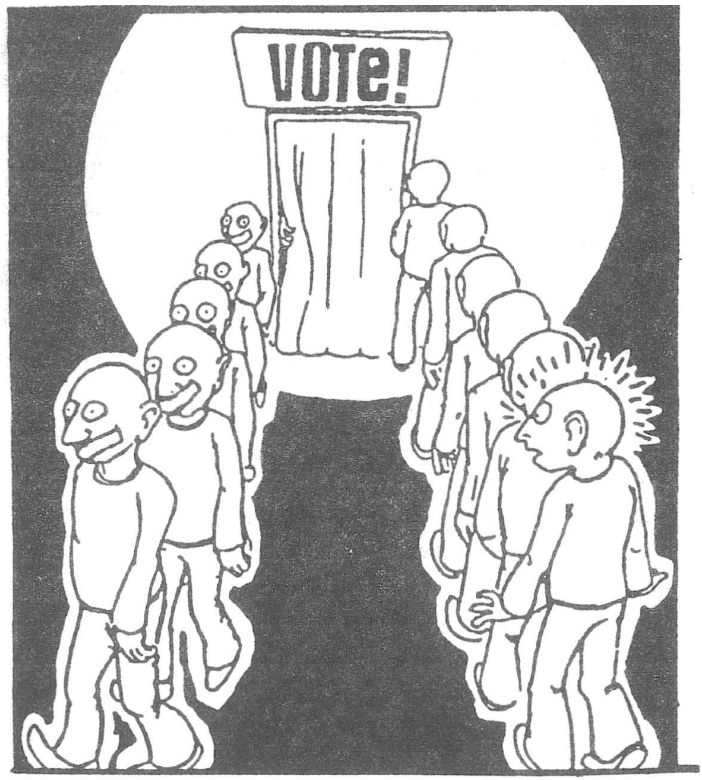
Another solution to the problem of political decision-making is local autonomy. By having small units -- 1000 to 100,000 people rather than one million to 100 million -- large administrative bureaucracies and powerful politicians are not required. With a diversity of autonomous communities with different political and economic arrangements, people would be able to choose to live under a political system that is to their liking.

Application to economics

Demarchy is basically a democratic political alternative to elections. It is compatible with a range of economic systems, from competitive capitalism to communal ownership. But it rules out a dominant role for large corporate or government bureaucracies.

For example, if a demarchic body makes a decision to build a rapid transit system, it might choose between tenders from private firms, or it might rely on agreement from a collective of builders.

The principles of demarchy can be applied to the economic sphere. For example, a network of trust bodies, whose members are chosen randomly from volunteers, can take responsibility for different types and regions of land, including agricultural land, forest and coasts. Each trust body considers applications to use the



land and makes decisions taking into account a range of factors including productivity, social welfare and environment. Depending on the use and any likely negative consequences, a larger or smaller rent is charged for each use. The rents are used to pay for general social services (such as roads and child care). With a comprehensive system of this sort, income and excise taxes can be abolished, along with the massive apparatus for collecting them.

The advantage of random selection in this case is that the people making crucial economic decisions are unlikely to be the ones personally affected, especially by windfall profits or insider dealings. This is further ensured by publishing all deliberations of the trust bodies. The trust bodies are able to make their judgements much more on the basis of the general interest than happens with capitalist or socialist economic systems, in which private profit or bureaucratic interests are the driving forces.

Other applications of demarchy to economics are possible, but much more investigation and experimentation remains to be done to see how they would work. Suffice it to say that demarchy opens up the possibility of alternatives which avoid many of the problems of present economic systems which result in poverty, massive inequality, and alienation.

Random selection in action

The most widespread use of random selection in social decision-making today is for juries for trials. The jury has several advantages over a judge. One is relative independence from vested interests: juries are less susceptible to the lures of status, money and power. They are not employees of the state, and can make independent judgements. Juries on many occasions have refused to convict people when they consider the law is unjust. Finally, members of juries can test each other's views in a way no judge can.

In recent years there have been a few experiments with random selection for other sorts of decision-making. The Jefferson Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, has introduced the 'policy jury.' This is a group of typically 12 people, randomly selected from local residents, who make suggestions on difficult policy issues. One policy jury project dealt with the problem of agricultural chemicals entering water supplies. Other projects dealt with organ transplants and with school-based clinics. In each case, the policy juries heard testimony from a range of

witnesses and were backed up by ample administrative support. These projects showed that policy jury members took their voluntarily assumed duties extremely seriously, resulting in recommendations that were widely respected.

A similar use of random selection for policy advice has been independently developed and studied in West Germany for many years. Numerous 'planning cells', consisting of randomly selected groups of about 25 people, have been formed to spend a week dealing with policy issues in areas such as energy, town planning and information technology. Much of the time of the planning cell members is spent in small groups of about 5 people each, whose membership is rotated to prevent group hierarchies emerging. It is found that participants learn quickly, are sensitive to long-term problems, and focus on the common good. Both the US and West German projects have used several groups simultaneously studying the same issue, to broaden participation and obtain more reliable findings.

In Australia, random selection has been used in processes to develop new organisational structures in trade unions. The possibilities are endless, but enormous commitment and effort is required to carry a single project to completion. So far just the surface has been touched.

Contacts

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"Hi. I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you!"

Some unanswered questions

Demarchy is still at an early stage of development. It has many aspects which have hardly been thought about, much less tried out. There is a great need for discussion and experimentation to deal with questions such as these:

* How can people be encouraged to offer themselves for selection to demarchic bodies? What are the barriers to participation?

* How vital is economic structure to the effectiveness of demarchy?

* How can the 'second-order bodies', which adjudicate on how demarchy is to work, be protected against manipulation?

* Can demarchy be undermined by new techniques deployed by experts, elites and bureaucrats?

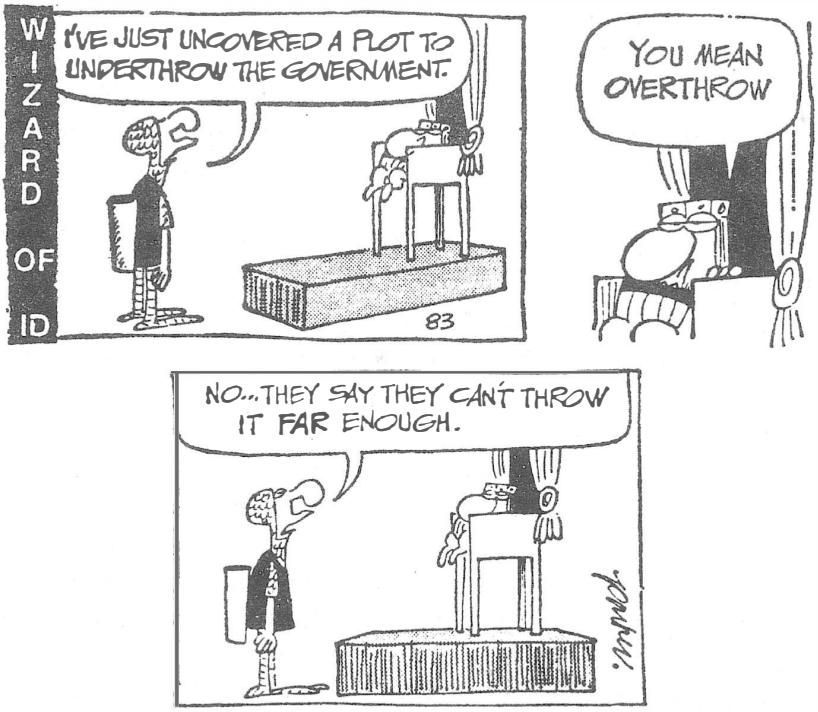
What you can do

The best way to develop and promote demarchy is to try out the lot system in a variety of situations, in a small way at first. This could be in a sporting club, a national environmental group, a trade union or a local government instrumentality. The opportunity might arise when faction fights paralyse action, or when existing leaders are discredited due to inefficiency or corruption. Alternatively, a well-functioning organisation might decide to try the lot system in order to extend and protect democratic participation.

One thing is sure. There is little point in trying to persuade governments to step down and set up demarchy instead. Demarchy will have to be promoted at the grassroots. In this way its potential and limitations can be tested in the most flexible conditions.

Demarchy by itself is not the solution to all the world's problems. Demarchic bodies can make bad decisions; there can still be serious community conflicts and crises; poverty and injustice are not automatically eliminated. But although demarchy does not guarantee a golden age, the effort to develop and promote it can be a useful part of other struggles for a better world.

"Now, the first thing we'll do is set up some form of government."


WIZARD OF ID
I'VE JUST UNCOVERED A PLOT TO UNDERTHROW THE GOVERNMENT.
83
YOU MEAN OVERTHROW
NO...THEY SAY THEY CAN'T THROW IT FAR ENOUGH.

Further reading

Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Discussion of a range of democratic alternatives.

John Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible? The Alternative to Electoral Politics* (London: Polity Press, 1985). The definitive argument for demarchy.

Ernest Callenbach and Michael Phillips, *A Citizen Legislature* (Berkeley: Banyan Tree Books, 1985). Proposal for a 'representative house' chosen by lot in the United States.

Fred Emery, *Toward Real Democracy* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Labour Occasional Paper, 1989).

David Held and Christopher Pollitt (editors), *New Forms of Democracy* (London: Sage, 1986). A survey of prospects in a variety of areas.

Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980). A perceptive account of the strengths and weaknesses of both representative (adversary) democracy and consensus (unitary democracy).

Athenian democracy

Ancient Athens is looked to as the forerunner of modern democracy, even though Athens was not democratic by many of today's standards. Only free men were accepted as citizens; women and slaves were excluded. While acknowledging these shortcomings, there is still much to learn from classical Athens.

The Athenians used the lot system extensively as a democratic means of selection. They were committed to equality, and selection by lot ensured equality of results rather than only equality of opportunity. Members of the assembly were chosen by lot. This reduced factionalism, since factions could not guarantee that their candidates would be chosen. Furthermore, the authority of the assembly was increased, since it was recognised as representative rather than as the result of manipulation by power-seekers.

At meetings of the assembly, the chairman was chosen by lot at the beginning of the meeting. In this way, factions could not organise the agenda beforehand.

The Athenians also relied on elections, for example for leaders of the military. They used a variety of techniques, each chosen for its own political benefits.

Many defenders of elections argue that the conditions of classical Greece do not apply today, and that the lot system will not work. But surely it is worth trying out alternatives. The ancient Greeks did not rest with one system simply because that was the way it had always been done.

For more information contact

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We welcome your comments and suggestions for developing and applying the ideas outlined here, and for preparing future material.

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